

Practical Problems In a Real-Life Church

1 Corinthians 16:1-24

Introduction

Last Sermon: This is the last sermon in 1 Corinthians. It's been a bumpy ride so today I just hope we can walk away from the landing. I can honestly say I think this has (surprisingly) been the hardest book of the Bible I've ever taught.¹ There were quite a few landmines (e.g., sex and singleness, spiritual gifts and worship wars, head coverings and headship, relationships and resurrection).

- Chapter 15 was the high point of the letter showing the necessity and centrality of the resurrection as the anchor for our eternal hope and present purpose.

Potluck: But this is not an **abstract** theology textbook but a **letter** written to real people in a real church in a real city in the **real world**. So chapter 16 serves as the **conclusion** to this letter.

- Here are the final things that Paul has to say (like a mom yelling to you as you're going out the door; buckle your seatbelt, don't talk to strangers, etc.) and the real-world issues he needs to deal with.
- One pastor describes this chapter as a **tapas** chapter (Spanish style of eating a sampling of small, savory dishes rather than one big meal). But I'm Baptist, so I think it's more like a **potluck**. Where else can you go and eat lasagna, fried chicken, jello salad, corn pudding, mac and cheese, and deviled eggs (inappropriate if you ask me).

Practical Theology: What unifies this chapter is the practical nature of the problems addressed and the personal care that Paul shows to this church.

- It's one thing to say "love one another" it's another to say "love Tammy." It's one thing to say "Stop sinning" and another to say "Jonathan, stop sleeping with your girlfriend." It's one thing to say "Don't be greedy" and another to say "Stephanie, you're robbing from God."
 - **We love abstractions but hate specifics.** We love to hate sin as long as we don't have to hate *our* sin.
- But sanctification requires we go from unspecific abstractions to clear, personal application. We go from understanding the gospel to applying it to our real lives. Becoming holy does not mean we become more ethereal and detached from the real world but that the wisdom of god starts to show up in the way we deal with money, sexuality, work, and relationships.
- "Many people resent church because their parents were good at church (and church talk) but not good at life. They struggle attending a place that consumed their parents' time but never transformed their parents' lives" (Anonymous).

I would argue that **theology really does** (or should) **impact the way you live the world** (e.g., Trinity, love, etc.).

¹ Greek of 1 Corinthians was harder than I remember, not because of vocabulary or grammar *per se* but because the translation issues more frequently intersected with debated interpretive issues (and even textual variants, cf. 14:34-35).

- When you understand the greatness and sovereignty of God you can trust him and don't have to be in control. You go from overbearing to gentle and risk-averse to fearless.
- When you understand the glory of God you no longer have to fear other people. You don't have to avoid godly confrontation or crave the approval of people. You don't have to pretend or hide your true self.
- When you understand the grace of God you don't have to prove yourself. You can take criticism and withstand failure. You can relax.²
- The gospel really is the most practical thing

In 1 Corinthians 16, we get a front-row seat to the practical application of the gospel to the Corinthian church.

¹ Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. ² On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. ³ And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. ⁴ If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me. ⁵ I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, ⁶ and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may help me on my journey, wherever I go. ⁷ For I do not want to see you now just in passing. I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. ⁸ But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, ⁹ for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries. ¹⁰ When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am. ¹¹ So let no one despise him. Help him on his way in peace, that he may return to me, for I am expecting him with the brothers. ¹² Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers, but it was not at all his will to come now. He will come when he has opportunity. ¹³ Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. ¹⁴ Let all that you do be done in love. ¹⁵ Now I urge you, brothers—you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints— ¹⁶ be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and laborer. ¹⁷ I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence, ¹⁸ for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. Give recognition to such people. ¹⁹ The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord. ²⁰ All the brothers send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss. ²¹ I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. ²² If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Our Lord, come! ²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. ²⁴ My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.

1. Money (vv. 1-3)

¹ Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. ² On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. ³ And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem.

² Adapted from Tim Chester's "4 G's."

Touchy Subject: If you don't like preachers talking about money then you better hope they don't preach the Bible (Jesus talks about money all the time)³. Why? Jesus said too much about earthly treasures, material possessions, and money to ignore it. Jesus doesn't want or need your money (e.g., *cattle on a thousand hills*). He only asked for money once (i.e., *a coin for illustration*). He isn't trying to get your money but to keep your money from getting you. Money (or the love of money) is an idol that keeps us from enjoying God (*you can be poor and idolize money; daydream; fix my problems*). I'm not asking for your money (*I don't get paid more if you give more; we're not passing the offering plate*).

Tithing: There's a lot of misinformation around tithing. First, there are lots of tithes in the OT (Levitical tithe, festival tithe for the poor, etc.). If you add them all up they are not 10% but closer to 23% (😬).

- The specifics of tithing do not apply to New Testament giving. Your pastors are not priests. This building is not the temple. There is no baseline number to give to God (he **actually** has the right to **all** of your money). There is NT precedent for funding the ministries of the church and paying pastors, etc. If you don't give, ministry doesn't happen.
- There are some **principle overlaps** between the OT and NT (as you would expect). The NT makes clear that you are called to give **regularly, cheerfully, sacrificially, and generously**.
- Everybody gives to something. *Something gets your first and best*. *Wife: Let me check my schedule and see if I can fit you in. You can have two days a week!*
- They are holding back. They can't **trust** God with their money. They need a backup plan. We'll cheer God from the sidelines but as soon as he wants my money, I'm not getting in the wheelbarrow (e.g., *fans vs. followers; nothing on the line*).
 - **Giving is not an obligation to make God love you more but an invitation to trust God with all of your life** (including your stuff). God is inviting you to experience and commune with him (because you can't love your money and love him at the same time).
- **"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"** (Matt 6:21). You can't treasure your stuff and treasure Christ at the same time. So when you refuse to give God everything, you are actually robbing yourself of the joy of fully surrendering to him.

Practical Wisdom: The only way the mission of God gets accomplished is if we partner together (including our money) to care for each other and advance the gospel.

- Our bills don't get paid if you don't give. Our ministries don't get funded if you don't give. Our missionaries don't get paid.
 - A major part of Paul's ministry was caring for the Jerusalem church through the generous financial gifts of the new Gentile churches.

Principles:

- There's a **disciplined plan** (a budget). Every week at the start.

³ Matt 6:19-24

- There's **personal flexibility** (diversity). Each gives as is appropriate (some give more, some give less, all give some). Your giving should be generous, regular, cheerful, and sacrificial (\$20 might be nothing for some and everything for someone else).
- There's **transparent accountability** (a certified letter). Our budgets are public for all members. Nothing is hidden, everything is voted on.

Partnership: We have been blessed as a church plant for the generous gifts of others (personal gifts, Send Network of NAMB, Summit Collaborative, Parkway Baptist Church, Sherwood Baptist Church, 3 Circle Church, **Nansemond River Baptist**).

- We want to be generous in the way we fund our ministry and help other churches. Your money now helps to fund other church plants.

2. Decisions (vv. 4-12)

⁴ If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me. ⁵ I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, ⁶ and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may help me on my journey, wherever I go. ⁷ For I do not want to see you now just in passing. I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. ⁸ But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, ⁹ for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries. ¹⁰ When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am. ¹¹ So let no one despise him. Help him on his way in peace, that he may return to me, for I am expecting him with the brothers. ¹² Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers, but it was not at all his will to come now. He will come when he has opportunity.

In Person: He's talking about an in-person visit (better than a letter). Don't sacrifice the embodied relationship for the in-person relationship (e.g., Youtube preacher is no substitute for real embodied gathering of God's people). Not just in passing but spend[ing] some [real] time with [them] (a deeper relationship).

Decision Making and the Will of God:

- **Clarity.** Do what's clear first. I intend to pass through Macedonia.
- **Desire.** Wants to see them. Desires aren't everything but they aren't nothing. I hope to spend some time with you. (It wasn't Apollos desire to come now)
- **Open Door.** If the Lord permits. Ultimately God will make it clear by what is available. (Apollos will come when he has an opportunity). Pay attention. Listen to God. Use your brain (e.g., Rwanda opportunity).
- **Prioritize.** There's an opportunity in Ephesus (a wide door for effective work has opened to me).

Open Not Easy: For a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries. **An Open door doesn't mean an easy path.** God's path and opposition can coexist.

- We are masters of self-deception. It is so easy to convince ourselves that the door is closed because we face a little resistance or that we must be doing the right thing because it's hard (the devil's unhappy with us).
 - It takes wisdom, self-awareness, and honesty. "Courage" is knowing it might hurt and doing it anyway. "Stupidity" is the same. And that's why life is hard.

It's Not All About Paul: The mission goes on without Paul. Even if he can't make it in person, Timothy will come in his stead (he's not indispensable). None of us are indispensable.

- Don't despise Timothy (cf. 1 Tim 4:12). "Don't shoot the messenger." If the content and tone of this letter is any indication, Paul has ruffled some feathers, so his emissary might not be welcome.

3. Behavior (vv. 13-14)

¹³ Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. ¹⁴ Let all that you do be done in love. (¹³ Γρηγορείτε, στήκετε ἐν τῇ πίστει, ἀνδρίζεσθε, κραταιοῦσθε. ¹⁴ πάντα ὑμῶν ἐν ἀγάπῃ γινέσθω).

Imperatives: Paul lists **five** concluding imperatives. An **imperative** is what you are to do (commands). **Indicatives** are facts or what you are. He's spent a lot of time explaining who they are in Christ, the facts of the gospel.

- "It is not healthy to preach moral imperatives without gospel indicatives." Who you are is the basis of what you do. "But it is not healthy either to preach gospel indicatives without gospel imperatives... [W]hen Jesus said, 'Go and do likewise' he meant 'Go and do likewise'" (Bird).

Because Christ is raised from the dead. Because the gospel is the true story of who we are. Because Jesus is coming back to judge the living and the dead. **Be alert, stand firm, be courageous, be strong, and do all of it in love.**

- **(1) Be watchful:** Be alert, be **prepared**. One of the areas of discipleship that I find often missing is the importance of preparation. We are so enamored by giftedness that we often overlook daily patterns of character. "A call to preach is a call to prepare or it's just a desire to perform." You see a lot of folks chasing clout and influence, and cutting corners to do so. In these cases, there are folks who have influence without the character necessary to make their opinions wise (e.g., why do we want to hear from actors or athletes on elections, etc.?). I'm called to be a teacher (wisdom) not an influencer.
 - I think back to Noah building an ark in the desert when no one had even seen rain. How many of us would wait until we saw the rain to start obeying God and build the ark (too late I might add)? Or we'd give up as soon as we realized the crowd was mocking us rather than joining us. Or we'd lose interest if God didn't send rain quickly enough (some speculate it took Noah decades to build the ark).
 - Simply responding to an invitation is not enough ("It's a much easier thing to walk an aisle than take up a cross," Dever). A **profession** of allegiance is not the same thing as a **life** of allegiance (**many have enough faith to like him but not**

enough to be like him). Positive feelings and sentiments toward Jesus aren't enough.

- **(2) Stand Firm in the Faith:** This echoes the end of chapter 15: Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain (15:58). Don't be fickle and unstable, tossed to and fro by every cultural fad and passing temptation. Anchor your hope in the gospel and don't move.
 - We need to respond to cultural challenges and upheaval but not by abandoning the truth of God and his gospel. I'm less worried about relevance and more worried about significance.
 - Not thrown off by the crazy stuff. **A non-anxious presence in an anxious world.** People don't need someone who is always changing but someone who is humbly confident in who they are in Christ and what his call for them is.
 - Growth is good but it is a bad sign when Christian leaders change their minds on central theological issues late in ministry.

Why God Might Not Answer Your Prayer the Way You Want (adapted from Greig)

- Common Sense: Am I asking God to do something stupid, meaningless, or illogical?
- Contradiction: Are my prayers likely to be conflicting with those of someone else?
- Life is Tough: Am I expecting God to spare me from discomfort?
- Doctrine: Does my prayer reflect God's character and His promises in the Bible?
- Second Best: Is it possible that God has something even better for me?
- Motive: Is my prayer essentially just selfish?
- Influence: Am I trying to exercise ungodly power over a person's life?
- Faith: Do I really believe that God can do this?
- Perseverance: Do I want it enough to keep praying?
 - Do I believe in something enough to stick with it even when it's tough?
- **(3) Act Like Men:** This phrase might hit some of our gendered ears as sexist and exclusionary but it is simply Paul's colloquial way of saying "man up", by which he means to be courageous. He is not talking just to the men but to all the church in Corinth (e.g., LXX word used for soldiers, valor in battle).
 - To stand for the truth of the gospel in a city like Corinth (in a city like Philadelphia), in a world that hates the truth, **it's going to take courage.** "Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you." (Deut 3:16). "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go" (Josh 1:9). "For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control" (2 Tim 1:7). "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:20).
 - Fear is a **normal** and **natural** response. But following God allows for **supernatural** peace and courage.
 - To be courageous we have to take God's promise seriously, we have to act on the truth of God's word not the fear that fills our feelings. "You know, sometimes

all you need is twenty seconds of insane courage. Just literally twenty seconds of just embarrassing bravery. And I promise you, something great will come of it" (*We Bought a Zoo*).

- While we wait for "to the Lord's return" we "live responsibly, faithfully, compassionately, and courageously" (Carson).
- **(4) Be Strong:** Following Jesus is not for the faint of heart. It's often described in terms of a struggle or a fight. We get strength from the Spirit of God but it's still a fight.
 - "Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the LORD!" (Ps 31:24).
 - Strength and courage are not some worldly ability to muscle others into submission to your point of view. They are God-given attributes to allow you to humbly serve and sacrifice (e.g., more strength to exhibit Martin Luther King Jr's nonviolent resistance, or Corrie ten Booms hiding of Jews during WWII, etc.).
- **(5) Do All Of It In Love:** This is maybe the most important thing (remember ch. 13?). All the courage and strength in the world are no good if love is not the foundation. **Love doesn't replace or get rid of these other commands but is the necessary component to guide and direct them rightly.**
 - There are so many in our world that think kindness is optional as long as it's for the greater good. I don't have to be gentle (despite it being a biblical command) as long as my meanness accomplishes some higher cause. We see in politics that "winning is all that matters." One underqualified internet pundit recently said, "One of the greatest failures of [his political party] is its preference to lose nobly rather than win ugly." "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing." It's actually not. God actually cares more about the person you become than the things you accomplish. He has already won.

Character to Cultivate: These characteristics should be our goal and our guide (along with the Fruit of the Spirit, Gal 5:22-24; qualities of an overseer, 1 Tim 3:2-7; life of love, 1 Cor 13:4-7; etc.)

- Am I alert or distracted by worldly pursuits and temptations?
- Am I standing firm in obedience to God's commands or do I make excuses and change my mind often?
- Am courageous in standing on the truth of God's Word or am I timid and embarrassed by it?
- Am I strong or weak in my faith/
- Are my actions toward God and others done from love or self-interest?

4. Others (vv. 15-20)

¹⁵ Now I urge you, brothers—you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints— ¹⁶ be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and laborer. ¹⁷ I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence, ¹⁸ for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. Give recognition to such people.

Apply Love: Now's their chance to apply these truths, **to real people**.

- Paul tells us to honor certain kinds of people (like Epaphroditus and Timothy who risked their lives for the gospel; Phil 2:29-30). Here Stephanas had shown the character and service of someone worthy of being followed (be subject to).
- But the Corinthians were bucking Paul's authority and wouldn't want to follow these folks who he had baptized (1:16). It would have been easy to take out their frustration of Paul on these people (personal animosity and church politics).
 - But they were Co-laborers (συνεργοῦντι), hard workers (κοπιῶντι), servants (διακονίαν).
 - "How you treat the people you like and want to defend tells me nothing about your Christian faith. How you treat those you do not like and think are a problem tells me so much more about your Christian faith" (Yancey).
- We need to honor the right kind of people.

Family: ¹⁹ The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord. ²⁰ All the brothers send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

- In Christ we are a family (ἀδελφοί).
- There's an affectionate greeting (kiss). Don't get any ideas.
 - But it's a *holy* kiss. It's a sanctified greeting. Public affection is not the same thing as genuine love. "Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss so we'd know that someone's public affection for Jesus might not be telling the whole story" (Onwuchekwa). We are called to love one another sincerely.
 - Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart (1 Pet 1:22).
- A holy kiss in a divided church is a radical move. Do you love the idea of church or the actual people in your church?

5. Love (vv. 21-24)

²¹ I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. ²² If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Our Lord, come! ²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. ²⁴ My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Personal: Paul takes the pen in his **own hand** to write these final few sentences (often dictated letters to a scribe or writing secretary, i.e., amanuensis). He sends his love and asks for the grace of Jesus to be with them.

- But he focuses on the importance of their desire or affection. Do you love the Lord?
 - At the end of the day, we're not just interested in you doing the right things (though we hope you do), or knowing the right things (though that matters), but that all of it flows from a heart that loves what is right, which first and foremost is Christ.

- How will I know if I truly love Christ? I will long for the coming of Christ.⁴ I will desire the presence of Christ more than anything. My bucket list doesn't need to be completed first; I have no goals or accomplishments that I want him to wait for. Christ is my highest goal. For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness (Ps 84:10). I can say from the depth of my heart: Come, Lord Jesus.

⁴ See Messmer article for various interpretations of *Maranatha* but Rev 2:20 confirms traditional reading.